Gender Identity and Language

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ABSTRACT:

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Growing up is something that we all, as humans, need to go through. Part of growing up is the way in which our identity is shaped, and this more often than not is through processes outside of our own control. Recently, the subject of gender has been examined for critical in terms of identity and self image. Not only is gender substantially more complicated than what sex organs you are born with, but it is also shaped by the same processes that form the other facets of our identity. Gender is one of the faces of identity that is also heavily influenced by the language that is behind it. Pronouns such as he/him and she/her are used to distinguish people by gender identity. The way products are marketed is usually done so to appeal to one of an assumed two genders. Some of these factors are finding themselves under more criticism in recent times, as gender has grown to be seen as far less dichotomous recently. A larger push towards gender neutrality in marketing and language has been examined, to accommodate for a wider range of identities and to foster a more positive spectrum for those coming to terms with themselves growing up. This is very positive, as gender is distinct from sex as it is totally socially constructed and dominated by cultural and linguistic factors. Because of this, a more neutral stance towards to gender is quite incredible, and it’s likely that overtime tolerance will build up towards transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals.

Marketing is one thing very ingrained in our culture that keeps gender functioning as a dichotomous sort of institution. Items, toys, entertainment, and even food at times is marketed for men or women and boys or girls. What this does is shut down the possibility for a broader spectrum, as it’s assumed those consuming one side of the market don’t have any reason to reach into the other. One company that has made efforts to challenge this, however, is the department store chain Target. In 2015, the chain made the decision to stop labelling toys as intended for girls and boys, after certain activists and organizations called for action towards marketing that doesn’t make kids feel ashamed for wanting an item that doesn’t fall within the category of what they are placed inside of. This decision comes with critics, of course, as traditionalists vouch for a rigid distinction between genders defended by Biblical teaching (Hains, 2015, par.3). There isn’t very much ground contained in this argument, as Biblical sources don’t draw any examples as to what gender distinctions should look like. In fact, in the past, items were divided more by use and category than gender than they are now. Defenders of Targets change say that it’s positive as it will potentially foster more interests in STEM related toys for girls, and make boys less ashamed to show interest in feminine products (Hains, 2015, par.11). This doesn’t say anything about those who fall outside of the spectrum of girl-boy, however, and there are ways for gender nonconforming individuals to feel at home and foster their own identities.

Target marketing items to those falling outside of the girl-boy or man-women spectrum means that more attention and effort is given in the area of gender neutrality. This is interesting because it coincides with the use of the singular they/them pronouns, which are the main pronouns associated with gender neutrality. Individuals who feel uncomfortable inside of the typical gender dichotomy and with traditional he/him and she/her pronouns can opt to use the singular they as a signifier. This feeling can attributed to those who believe traditional gender assumptions to be outdated and incorrect, and that they do not accurately describe their own personal gender identity and attitude. In fact, traditional he and she pronouns are often seen as limiting by gender neutral individuals (Sharer, 2016, par.5). If more businesses take after Target, then perhaps there is more of a chance for gender-neutral individuals to feel at home, and maybe even children growing up will be more likely to find themselves outside of a traditional gender binary.

Not everyone is super enthusiastic about this trend towards neutrality, however, and critics certainly exist and express their opposition towards it. In an article, Alonzo Weston (2015) criticizes gender neutrality and goes on to compare it to sexual orientation, saying “You're either born straight or gay. No choice. But to purposely blend the lines between male and females is another issue. Ostensibly, it seems like a good idea, but on some level it feels like pushing children to disregard their sex” (par.5). He also goes on to say that “I think kids look at the toys in the aisle more than the signs describing what's in them. If a child sees an aisle full of Bratz dolls and Disney Princess toys, he or she will know what gender it's toward on the box. If a boy happens to want one of those toys, he'll pick it up anyway. No sign will stop him, nor should it,” (Weston, 2015, par.8) and “Changing gender signs and not revealing sex won't change anything at all,” (Weston, 2015, par.15). These statements miss the point completely, first by associating gender with sexual orientation, and then incorrectly taking into account for what gender neutrality means in the first place. Gender identity is as much of a choice as sexual orientation, meaning not at all, and they’re two distinct personality facets regardless. The greater idea at large isn’t to ignore gender markings and just buy what you want regardless, but to actively change the way marketing works in order to build up towards a system that allows for the acceptance and encouragement of diverse gender identities.

Despite the fact that Weston’s argument is flawed, it does draw from ideas that come from a gender essentialist viewpoint of thought. Gender essentialism means that gendered language and elements of sexist thought arise from biological differences between the male and female sexes. This is problematic because it implies that gender stereotypes and differences can be enforced as they contain a “kernel of truth” (Leaper and Bigler, 2004, pg.2) and are based on unfixable differences. Another viewpoint is that of gender environmentalism, which views that gender is taken from and learned from social practices. Gender environmental has come under increased scrutiny over recent years; however, as evidence builds up suggesting that environmental factors cannot count for rigid and extensive gender typing in early childhood alone. Research typically no longer focuses on gender environmentalism because of this (Leaper and Bigler, 2004, pg.2 and 3). With the perspectives of gender essentialism and environmentalism exhibiting problems, a third viewpoint known as gender constructionism has taken a seat as an option. Gender constructivist theory maintains that children simply do not passively take in and absorb their environments, but are actively sorting, extracting, and understanding important social messages inside of their environments. For example, a parent may use such things as gender labels or make a statement about gender, and the child would use these cues to construct their own theory on the nature of gender (Leaper and Bigler, 2004, pg. 3). This is an interesting standpoint, as it not only accommodates for the role of the environment in determining gender, but also gives children the credit to allow for the reasoning to argue that forming one’s gender identity is a dynamic process that goes beyond that of just boy or girl. It is certainly a lot more active and interesting than just saying that differences between the sexes are irreparable and static.